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Washing the Disciples' Feet--An Exposition of John 13:1-17

It is an impressive scene, that of Christ and his disciples gathered about the table in the upper room on the last night before his death, and the occasion is a most significant one. At no other time in the life of our Savior do we see such a manifestation of divine love and tenderness and at the same time such positive assumption of authority and lordship. It was most natural. He had come to his last hours with his disciples, and last hours are always important. Here were these hand-picked and personally trained leaders who were to carry on his work, and they must be given their final instructions, and their faith must be strengthened and purified. For that purpose he was there with them. What he says and does, therefore, on this occasion are profoundly significant, and are deserving of our most careful and prayerful consideration.

We shall consider the scripture in four parts: First, the Introduction (1-3), where the foundation is laid for a most significant act; second, the Act of Feet Washing (4, 5); third, Peter Corrected and Reproved (6-11); and fourth, the Rite Enjoined (12-17).

I. Introduction, or Laying the Foundation for a Most Significant Act (1-3).

It took place "before the feast of the passover," that is, the evening preceding that on which the paschal lamb was eaten. The occasion was not, therefore, the actual observance of the paschal meal of the Israelites.

It was "when Jesus knew that his hour was come" (1). This is in contrast to the expression frequently met with heretofore—"his hour was not yet come." The end was at hand and Jesus knew it. That adds to the seriousness and gravity of the situation.

What Jesus did here and what he said were inspired by his never-failing and deeply-moving love for his disciples. "Having loved his own, . . . he loved them unto the end" (1). Jesus loved them all along, we are reminded, but never more so than at the very end. In other words, the Gospel writer would have us know that never was his love so manifest as in these last hours, by these last acts. And when John wrote these words fifty or sixty years later he had lived to understand far more than he was able to understand that night, not only the deep, sacrificial measure of Jesus' love, but also the wise provision and the far-sightedness of it, as revealed in those final instructions. Here is the motive for the action.

Then follows a statement pointing to the order of events. "Supper being ended" means supper being completed, that is, prepared. A supper was prepared but not yet eaten. One ancient text (the Alexandrian) reads, "When the repast as a repast began," and that reading is approved by Tischendorf and Meyer.

In the same verse (2) we read, "The devil having put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him." That reveals not only the diabolical nature of the treachery in Judas' heart, but also indicates that Jesus understood that time was pressing, and that he must forthwith be about his final instructions to the church.

Furthermore, John informs us that Jesus was especially conscious of his deity and divine authority as he was about to enter upon the act of Feet Washing. "Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he was come from God and went to God" (3). Why did John think it necessary to record that Jesus was conscious of his sovereign position and divine origin on this occasion? It seems evident that John was made to understand at the time of the event that Jesus was actually establishing an ordinance and that he had the authority to do so.

II. The Act of Feet Washing (4, 5).

Jesus "riseth from supper (from the table), and laid aside his garments (his robe); and took a towel and girded himself (tied around himself, so as to leave both hands free for the feet washing). After that he poureth water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel wherewith he was girded" (4, 5). Note that the feet washing was performed at

the table, after all had been seated for supper, and not at the door where, as they entered the house, the customary washing for physical cleansing took place. It should be borne in mind also that the feet washing was done before the supper was eaten, while the quarrel among the disciples as to who should be greatest occurred after the meal and the eucharist, according to Luke (22:20, 24). That fact rules out the claim advanced by some that Jesus resorted to the feet washing as a means of settling the dispute between the disciples. All the circumstances under which the feet washing was done put the act beyond any ordinary custom and make it so strange and unique that it cannot be accounted for on any other ground than that it was the vehicle of some new and profound truth.

III. Peter Corrected and Reproved (6-11).

The feet washing went forward without interruption until Jesus came to Peter, who interposed an objection. He was outspoken and daringly bold beyond any of the other disciples, yet he very likely expressed the mind of all. "Lord, dost thou wash my feet?" (6) inquired Peter. Jesus replied, "What I do thou knowest not now, but thou shalt know hereafter" (7). The fact that he said that indicates that Jesus was not engaged in the customary feet washing with which Peter was perfectly familiar. But because he did not understand, and was not willing to wait to find out, he went a step further against the program of the Master, saying, "Thou shalt never wash my feet" (8). Jesus could not countenance a spirit of rebellion and disobedience, and he met Peter's defiance with words equally as positive, "If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me" (8). Submit, or forfeit your lot with me, was Jesus' ultimatum. Were those words for Peter's benefit only, or does Jesus hold the same attitude towards rebellion today as then? Is it a light thing for people who acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus to refuse to practice his established rites merely because they do not fully understand the significance of those rites?

But Peter's seeming rebellion was not of a malicious and persistent character. He was ignorant of Christ's purpose, and prejudiced against his methods, but he was not unwilling to be corrected and reproved. His love for the Lord Jesus was such that he was willing to change his attitude and do the thing he had formerly refused to do and could see no use in doing, when he found that it was his Lord's will. And yet he was slow to learn, as men are today. When he was faced with the seriousness of refusing to submit to the divine program, he would have swung to the other extreme of doing more than Jesus wished to have done, and would thus have violated the purpose and intent of the rite. When will we ever learn to do just what Jesus requires—no more, no less? From a refusal to have his feet washed, he changed to a clamor for rebaptism (9). And Jesus replied, "He that is bathed (or baptized) needeth not save to wash his feet" (10). As one returning from the public bath and getting his feet soiled along the way, does not take a complete bath again, but merely washes his feet, so the Christian who contracts defilement along the roadway of life, is not rebaptized but engages in the spiritual service of feet washing, symbolizing the cleansing which we may have of Christ whenever we come to him in faith. The baptismal rite is performed once for all as a cleansing from past sin, but the feet washing is to be repeated frequently, as a reminder of our constant need and as a sign of that daily purification which the Lord is ready to bestow upon us.

"And ye are clean" (10)—all were clean except Judas, whose treacherous heart had given its allegiance to Satan. They were "clean"—good, honest, sincere, devoted disciples, yet they had their frailties, as none knew better than Jesus, and they were certain to need the cleansing, vouchsafed through Jesus' blood and symbolized by the washing of one another's feet. That is the word of the Lord to us also—"ye are clean", but "except I wash thee",—

that is to us too. "Ye are clean" through the waters of baptism, but for just such folks he established the cleansing service of feet washing,—that is suggestive and should keep us humble, if we were inclined to be otherwise.

IV. The Rite Enjoined (12-17).

"So after he had washed their feet"—all objections had been silenced and he had finished the act, the service, the object lesson,—is that all it is? and all there is to it? What is there about the whole performance that makes it really significant? Consider—

1. Who it is who has done this thing? Jesus said to his disciples, You yourselves call me Lord and Master, or Teacher (13). And you are right. That is just what I am—Lord, Teacher. What is the function of a teacher and lord? Is it not to direct, to command, to teach? Why should the disciples have been reminded of this? The answer is plain. It was because they were being taught and commanded something to do. They must be reminded that it was the Lord God speaking and acting. That makes it significant for all people for all time.

2. Why had Jesus done this—washed the disciples' feet? Jesus himself tells us very definitely why he did it. He says, "For I have given you an example" (15). It was to set an example that he did it. What is an example given for? The answer is, To follow, to copy, to pattern after. Then he did the feet washing service to show us how we should do.

3. What did Jesus say to those to whom he had done this thing? Hear him, for in speaking to the disciples gathered in that upper room, he is speaking to his disciples of every age and clime. And he was never more specific and definite. Concerning no other teaching may we be more certain about what he says to us.

a. You ought, you are duty bound, to wash one another's feet (14). Could anything be more definitely enjoined upon a people than this upon the church?

b. You should do as I have done to you (15). There very definitely are we admonished to follow his example. How can we escape the responsibility?

c. Don't become too proud to obey. If not in so many words, yet very definitely in meaning, he says that very thing. "The servant is not greater than his Lord" (16), nor the messenger greater than the one sending him. This is a warning against change or modification of the charge.

d. "If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them" (17). Not only is the obligation very strongly and inescapably laid upon us, but blessing is pronounced upon those who really do it. That is the greatest reason of all for the practice of the ordinance of feet washing. If the duty were not so definitely and forcefully set before the church, it could not afford to miss the blessing that comes from the faithful and sincere observance of this rite.